

Prisoner Defense Committees

Rosa Parks had long been critical of the ways black defendants were treated within the criminal justice system. The 1970s and 1980s saw a number of black activists face criminal prosecution. As she had with the RNA, Parks joined the efforts to draw public attention to this political persecution. In 1971, Reverend Ben Chavis had been sent to Wilmington by the United Church of Christ to help engage students in a boycott of city schools. Seen as militant troublemakers, he and nine others would be subsequently charged with arson and conspiracy in the firebombing of a white grocery. All were convicted. Outraged, defense committees were started across the country to press for their sentences to be overturned. Detroiters founded a local Wilmington 10 Defense Committee — its honorary chairpersons in 1976 included John Conyers, Judge Crockett, and Rosa Parks — which called for an appeal in the case. They fundraised to support the case and published a public statement in the newspaper.

Parks followed the case closely from her home in Detroit, as she did with the case of UCLA professor Angela Davis. Involved in the Free the Soledad Brothers campaign, Davis had been placed on the FBI's 10 Most Wanted and charged with murder and kidnapping in connection with an armed takeover of a Marin County courtroom by George Jackson's brother Jonathan, but she was ultimately acquitted of all charges. When Davis came to Detroit two weeks after her acquittal, Parks introduced her to the crowd of twelve thousand as a “dear sister who has suffered so much persecution.”

Long committed to justice for black women who had been raped or assaulted, Parks was one of the founders of the Joanne Little Defense Committee in Detroit. Little was charged with murder when she defended herself against the sexual advances of her jailer, Clarence Alligood. Little had been in jail for burglary when Alligood threatened her with an ice pick and forced her to perform oral sex. She managed to grab the ice pick, stabbed Alligood, and escaped, turning herself in to police days later. A broad-based grassroots movement to defend Little, including many Black Power groups, grew across the country. The mission statement of the Detroit group affirmed the right of women to defend themselves against their sexual attackers and raised the interlocking issues of poverty and criminal defense which meant poor people often could not afford to mount an adequate defense. Parks was one of the people put in charge of soliciting help from other organizations. Little was eventually acquitted.

Parks also campaigned vigorously on behalf of Gary Tyler, a sixteen-year-old black teenager who had been wrongfully convicted for the killing of a thirteen-year-old white boy Timothy Weber. As schools were desegregated in Louisiana, Tyler was riding a school bus attacked by a white mob angered by integration; a young white boy outside the bus was shot. Police boarded the bus and pulled Tyler and his classmates off for questioning, even though no gun was found on the bus. While the kids on the bus were questioned, none of the mob outside was. Tyler spoke back against the police tactics. The police brought Tyler in, beat him and charged him with Weber's murder. In a

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five-day trial, after police pressured some of Tyler's classmates (who would later recant) to testify, Tyler was sentenced to death. Parks gave the keynote at a packed meeting and rally in Detroit, attended meetings and continued to work to see his conviction overturned. In July 1976, the Supreme Court ruled Louisiana's death penalty unconstitutional. While his death sentence was lifted, Tyler, imprisoned at the notorious Angola prison, was re-sentenced to a life sentence and is still in prison.